How to End Talking in Shul: A New Train-ing Technique

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Steve Lipman, a veteran staff writer at The Jewish Week (New York), is a frequent Amtrak passenger.

It was a Torah lesson on Track 13-W.

And none of the “teachers” were Jewish.

Settling into my seat, I barely heard the two women, 20ish, speaking across the aisle from each other, one row in front of me, on a southbound Amtrak train, in the second-last car from the rear, one recent afternoon.

But a woman in a seat behind them did.

“This is a Quiet Car," she said firmly but friendly, pointing to one of the ubiquitous signs in the Amtrak car that designated that venue as a respite from cellphone conversations or discussions between seatmates that can be overheard by other travelers. "You can't talk so loudly that other people can hear you,” she added, making her point clear – she had heard them.

The woman, wearing an Amtrak uniform (she was off-duty, enjoying a free ride, one of the perks of an Amtrak job), bore an air of authority.

She was stating company policy. But the train had not started its route out of New York City, it was still taking on passengers in the depths of Penn Station, and I was sure that the two women engaged in audible palaver would take offense or protest that the trip technically had not begun.

Instead, they ceased their talking. Immediately. They did not frown or sulk or cop an attitude.

They apparently understood the posted rules of the space they were occupying, and, caught in the act of violating them, corrected their miscreant behavior. Not a further word was exchanged between them as the train rolled for hours toward Richmond. They had been wrong, they knew it, and sheket prevailed.

They held their tongues. No pilpul about the details of the railway's etiquette regulations.

Their almost-whispered words had not bothered me; their conversation had been tolerable. But on Amtrak, rules are rules; no almost-Quiet-Car.

I opened a book and started to read.

In the ensuing silence, my mind drifted to synagogue. To several synagogues where I have prayed.

How many times, I thought, have I witnessed people (primarily men, because that is the section of shul in which I always sit) talking loudly and disturbingly in

violation of fellow worshipers' kavana and the shul's unwritten and often-written (posted in conspicuous Hebrew signs) warnings about the halachic impropriety and derech-eretz implications of talking during times of Shemoneh Esrei, leining of the Torah and other times when spoken interruptions are inappropriate.

The signs don't work.

Neither does humor; in one shtiebel I once spotted a sign in Hebrew that stated, “It is forbidden to pray or read the Torah during time of talking.”

Nor rabbis’ frequent reminders and sermons and shiurim.

Nor gabbais’ halting of the Torah reading and/or the chazores haShatz until the buzz in the seats ceases.

Nor the why-not-to-talk-during-davening booklets distributed in many places of tefillah, and various organizations’ similar awareness campaigns.

Nor the stares or glares or "shaa!"s of people trying to pray.

The talkers are usually indifferent to all of this; maybe they are speaking too loudly to pay attention.

What's the difference between Amtrak’s Northeast Regional and our corner congregation? Why do Amtrak passengers obey, literally without a peep (my experience aside, you rarely hear an out-of-line sound in the Quiet Car), especially when corrected?

And it’s not only the Quiet Car.

It’s taken for granted that silence rules in some other places. Like a library. Who would raise his or her voice there? Or a movie theater? Or a classical music

concert? Or the fans’ gallery of a major golf tournament where a contending player is lining up an important putt?

Why is a minyan exempt?

Many explanations come to mind: a shul is the daveners’ home, they’re not guests, they determine what goes; the people shushing them are friends, who can be ignored, unlike the strangers sharing a train coach; the people doing the talking aren’t necessarily interested in the worship experience of the morning in shul, unlike the shushers; away from work, the talkers aren’t about to take orders from anyone; they resent the challenge to their machismo; davening is long, especially on Shabbat and yom tov, and maintaining one’s level of concentration for several hours can be a challenge; there’s no penalty for out-of-place talking – no one’s likely to be asked to leave.

Basically, they talk because they don’t think about illicit words’ wider ethical implications, and they know they can get away with it.

Unlike the situation on Amtrak, where Quiet Car talking is not an assertion of one-upmanship.

The capitol’s monthly Washingtonian magazine offered a history of the national carrier’s “silent oasis” a few years ago. A blessedly quiet car has become a feature of every pricy Acela train and its slower-and-less-expensive cousin, the Northeast Regional because of “that greatest of American traditions: mob rule.”

Almost two decades ago, according to the magazine, some regulars on the Northeast Direct 151, an early-morning run from Philadelphia to DC, “decided they’d had enough of other riders yakking on their cell phones while they tried to sleep.” So the offended riders asked the crew to unofficially designate a noise-free car for the trip. An instant success.

When Amtrak bosses saw how effectively the gang had managed to enforce the silence, they agreed to institutionalize the practice and keep it self-policing.

A Quiet Car was an idea whose time had come. Today, if a passenger is listening to something on an electronic device, the sound must not penetrate beyond the headphones.

Today, nothing above a whisper.

“Nowadays,” Washingtonian reports, “the quiet car is the most prized spot on any train, and its culture is one of strict constructionism. Make a peep and the mob will crush you with icy glares, aggressive shushing, and … a ton of subtweeting.”

To reinforce this, Amtrak has produced “Shhh” cards in English and Spanish to be handed to talkative riders who may not have noticed the ever-present signs.

The Quiet Car’s atmosphere is conducive to silence – subdued lighting like in a classy restaurant; pages of books or magazines are quietly turned; loudness simply seems out of place.

The article also cited, on a bipartisan nature, some previous prominent offenders of the no-talking culture – FBI Director Louis Freeh, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (Republican) and Sen. Al Franken (Democrat).

All were shamed, by fellow riders or by rigorous Amtrak employees, into curtailing their obtrusive remarks or moving to another car, where talking is permitted.

The talkers reluctantly comply with the prevailing respectful atmosphere.

If only public censure and disapproval were as effective in shul.

While the talkers in the pews are selectively deaf to the expressed concerns of their fellow daveners, they decidedly are not mute.

This is not a recent phenomenon. Chazal have been discussing this topic and offering suggestions to counter it -- apparently without success -- for hundreds of years. Articles in heimish newspapers and magazines often offer suggestions.

No panacea has turned up.

This is not a location-specific phenomenon, not only present in big-city congregations.

Several years ago, I davened in a small, "out'-of-town" synagogue that had as members a large number of Jewishly educated men who alternated giving drushas on Saturday mornings. One week, when one of those men returned from shacharit, his wife asked, "Who talked in shul today?" In other words, who was thedarshan de jure?

"Everybody," her husband answered. In other words, it was not a quiet davening.

Common courtesy dictates that one should be still when any noise distracts others. Halacha sets higher standards; our prayers should be audible to ourselves – and to G-d – but not to the person standing next to us. Besides being rude and contrary to Jewish law, talking when silence should prevail undoubtedly hinders one's kavana. How many of us have the power of concentration to focus fully on our tefillot when our neighbors in the pews are talking about the stock market, the previous night's ballgame, their kids, their upcoming trip to Eretz Yisroel or other sundry matters best left for Kiddush time, over a plate of kugel?

I’ve seen some people protest such talking infractions.

A friend of mine in a shul near New York told me he had once proposed a seating plan to the congregation's rabbi: have signs displayed in certain areas, like state markers at a political convention, indicating that area's topic of conversation during davening -- "Sports," "Careers," "Weather," etc. My friend did not get the

rabbi's permission, but the rabbi got the sarcastic point. A WWII D-Day veteran who did not consider himself the most stringent of halacha observers, my friend took his time in shul seriously. During davening, he wanted no distractions.

At a large congregation in Brooklyn's Boro Park neighborhood, a young chassid, shtreimel atop his head, will ask his fellow mitpallim, when the decibel level during tefillah becomes intolerable, "If you come here to talk, where do you go to pray?”The question is rhetorical.The answer should be also -- shul is for talking only to the One Above.

A rabbi in a Berlin synagogue where I attended Shabbat services several years ago had an effective idea. In the years after large numbers of Jews immigrated from the Soviet Union, many ended up in Germany, particularly in the country’s major cities.

The rav of the shul, wanting to strengthen the Yiddishkeit of emigres who had spent decades in a culture where any practice of religion, or any education thereof, was strictly verboten, sought to attract the Jewish newcomers -- especially the senior citizens who had some sentimental memories of Judaism in their home -- to his synagogue. But he recognized that they would have little inclination to properly spend time in unfamiliar, hours-long worship services. And if they came, they would talk.

Instead, he offered an alternative during minyan time – a social hour or two that would include some schmoozing with their landsleit, some snacks, some divrei Torah and some explanations of the prayers that were taking place, without interruptions, elsewhere in the building.

Everyone gained.

The sanctity of the tefillah was preserved; and some of the ex-Soviet Jews, once they learned about the meaning of the contents of the siddur, in time came to

minyan. As worshipers, not talkers.

Some schnapps and herring did the trick. Reminders and scolding and lectures wouldn’t help.

For the short-run, is it better that people interested in being in shul on Shabbat but not in minyan have another option? Literally lo b’shma ba l’shma; they might come eventually for the right reason.

The problem is that minyanim frequented by talkers tend to be friendly, welcoming minyanim, where people feel at home. They’re the minyanim someone would want to join. On the other hand, the quieter minyanim are, I have found, largely cold and unwelcoming. In the former, a stranger is likely to be approached by the regulars, offered a tallit or an aliyah or a Shabbos meal invitation; in the latter, you’re more likely to be ignored.

The friendliness, which is laudable, breeds the comfort to talk.The challenge is to combine the best of both worlds.

The Amtrak example, and some observation of various minyanim I’ve attended, suggests some methods to reinforce the desired behavior:

Display “No talking zone during davening” signs in conspicuous spots throughout the sanctuary so no one can plead ignorance.

Have the gabbai or rabbi announce at the start of every worship service that “this is a no-talking minyan.”

If you’re the person being disturbed by the talking, don’t compound the situation by being rude; simply, and quietly, indicate that you’re in a no-talking minyan. The purpose is silence, not embarrassment.

At least simply establish an official, identified, recognized no-talking zone in the sanctuary or beit midrash where davening takes place, rows of pews where adherence to that policy is the norm. In other words. Make that the prestigious makom in shul.

Make no talking the norm; so the talkers become the outliers.

If someone tries to talk to you during davening, don’t respond; smile, put your finger to your lips and point to your place in the siddur.

Teach these type of gentle reminders to the folks who want to pray, so they can politely but effectively and consistently get the point across.

Provide options – a room where the people who prefers talking to tefillah can go while staying in shul; offer shiurim there so those folks can gainfully spend their time outside of the Beit HaKnesset.

Position non-talkers throughout the pews, so the talkers cannot congregate among themselves.

Make the talkers pay – literally. While a writer in Fortune magazine suggested that a seat in a (coveted) Quiet Car might cost more than one in an undesignated car, the reverse should be the case in shul; charge more to sit in a talkers’ minyan. Maybe the onus, if not the financial penalty, will serve as a deterrent.

Reward the people who refrain from inappropriate gabbing; maybe a frequent-complier certificate.

On the other hand, no aliyot or other honors for habitual talkers.

Thank the people who have changed their gabby behavior.

Finally, institute a penalty for the incorrigibles. A friend, who years ago served as a gabbai in his congregation’s hashkama minyan, pleaded at length with a member of the minyan, a prominent member of the synagogue, to curtail the constant chatter during davening. To no avail. My friend then sent a letter to chatterer, uninviting him from attending the minyan. The chatterer was predictably offended by the banning, but he complied, and the sanctity of the minyan was preserved.

Amtrak has the right idea – there’s a time and place for friendly conversation, but a Quiet Car and a minyan are not the place; a minyan certainly is not the time.

Maybe we don't need rabbis to enforce decorum in shul. Maybe we should invite some Amtrak conductors and passengers to our minyanim.

All aboard?